



THE MARATHAS IN 1803: EFFETE POWER OR UNLUCKY LOSERS?*

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Every soldier of the 78th was a giant by Marhatta standards. Their kilts were swinging in unison; their weapons and buckles were polished and their belts freshly whitened. Nobody who saw this magnificent regiment deliver its first assault of Assaye ever forgot it.... Then they went on again with their bayonets gleaming.¹

This passage from Jac Weller's book *Wellington in India* epitomizes for Cooper Western stereotypical representations of the Anglo-Maratha conflict of 1803—stereotypes which seem to have persisted in Western narratives in spite of the long passage of time since the event. These narratives resonate with the inevitability of English victory—the infallibility of English or Western arms when posed against the Asiatic. The ethnocentrism implicit in these histories have resulted in an increasing focus on Assaye at the cost of neglecting the rest of the campaign. Cooper argues that a kind of iconography centering on Arthur Wellesely (who subsequently became the Duke of Wellington) and his exploits at Assaye took firm roots. The mystification of Wellington in the wake of his success against Napoleon at Waterloo resulted in Assaye being depicted as one of the decisive battles in the ultimate victory of Britain's international struggle against France.²

Cooper mentions William Thorn's memoir of the 1803 campaign as the most influential work of this school of thought. He says that Thorn was of the view that the roots of Britain's ultimate victory in the Napoleonic wars and the consequent liberation of Europe lay in the plains of Hindustan and the chain of operations against the Marathas stretching across the breadth of India. He firmly believed that Napoleon was competing with Britain for, in Cooper's words, the 'resources of India'.

* Based on Randolph G.S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India: The Struggle for Control of the South Asian Military Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Pp. xvii + 437. Rs 695.00.

1. See Jac Weller, *Wellington in India* (London, 1972).

2. Randolph G.S. Cooper, op. cit., p. 12.

Cooper critiques Thorn's argument that revenue bearing grants of land held by the French mercenaries serving the Marathas implied a French state in north India, or in contemporary terms, a French satellite state which sought to dominate the region by controlling the rump of the Mughal state.³

Such works according to Cooper only reinforced popular perceptions in England of the Marathas being mere puppets in the hands of Western powers. This line of thought, Cooper says, left readers ignorant about Maratha military potential and their capacity to challenge one of the greatest superpowers of the day. The importance of the 1803 campaign was only in the context to it being the springboard that led to Napoleon's ultimate overthrow in Waterloo. Cooper implies that the significance, nature and enormity of the Maratha challenge in 1803 are lost on European and also South Asian historians of Maratha history.

Cooper through his cross conflict analysis of the Anglo-Maratha conflict of 1803 critiques such Eurocentric versions of military history smug in their belief of the superiority of Western military organization, discipline, technology, tactics, etc. over the Orient or, in this case, the South Asian military tradition. He argues that ethnocentric studies by Western scholars, weak in cross cultural analysis, have deeply underestimated the depth of the South Asian military culture and have generally portrayed South Asian military culture as stagnant and rooted in tradition. There has been a stubborn refusal to accord respect and validity to military values and ethics, which are at variance with their own. On the other hand, South Asian military cultures similar to Western military models are often labelled as cheap imitations.

Cooper seeks to correct what he terms as the historic and cultural imbalance. He also tries to show the information gaps generated in the process of its transmission from one cultural paradigm to another. He argues that the Western tendency to deal with large blocks of time when dealing with South Asian military history as a matter of convenience has further reinforced such ethnocentrisms. He therefore attempts to undertake a battle-by-battle study of the 1803 campaign. This, he feels, is necessary if one were to revise what he terms the gross generalizations made about South Asian military culture and experience (in this case being the nature of the threat posed by the Marathas in 1803).

3. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

Cooper's avowedly revisionist study therefore identifies 1803 as the highpoint of Maratha military power. He says that the Maratha armies, or more specifically the armies of Daulat Rao Scindia and Raghunath Bhonsle-2, were pan-Indian in origin and not proto Hindu, as is often supposed. These armies comprised ethnically diverse mercenary communities across the subcontinent and were, according to Cooper, somewhat akin to the forces of the modern Indian army. These communities were Marathas by association. Cooper asserts that the Marathas in 1803 were offering a pan-Indian challenge to the British. It was also a struggle for the loyalty of the various mercenary fighting communities of the subcontinent, and consequently the control of the South Asian military economy. The contest stretched across the Deccan, the Ganga Jamuna Doab and the Western and Eastern coastal regions of the subcontinent.

Cooper says that the ultimate Maratha loss meant that there would be no indigenous power left capable of rolling back the British expansion. Subsequent challenges in the form of the Anglo-Sikh wars and the Anglo-Afghan wars were limited in their scope. These were essentially localized conflicts, which according to Cooper had limited political appeal for Hindus beyond the regional strongholds of the Sikhs and the Afghans. He argues that while 1857 had the potential to develop into a pan-India resistance, the British were able to draw upon a wide pool of loyal soldiers. The British departure, Cooper argues, would have to await a more fundamental or as he terms it "a more profound shift in world order".

Cooper thus opines that the outcome of the 1803 campaigns went a long way in shaping the subsequent political history of the subcontinent. It is assigned an even greater importance than the events of 1857. The British victory in 1803 is shown as indirectly influencing 1857. Cooper seems to suggest that the British victory in 1803 afforded them the opportunity to draw on a vast pan-Indian pool of manpower which ultimately proved crucial to their success over the predominantly *purbaiya* rebel soldiers.

Cooper's argument funnily has some parallels with Thorn's arguments that he so vehemently critiques. While Thorn posits the British victory in 1803 as crucial to their ultimate subjugation of Napoleon, Cooper's difference with him lies in the fact that he instead accords

1803 a centrality in the eventual subjugation of the entire subcontinent by the British. He also assigns the Maratha challenge in 1803 a legitimate space while Thorn dismisses the Maratha effort and portrays English victory as inevitable. However, the basic tenor of these two differing arguments seems to concur in parts, a fact which Cooper possibly does not realize.

Cooper also overstates the decisiveness of the British victory in 1803 as far as their capacity to project power unchallenged on a pan-Indian scale lay. While the Marathas indeed were the last power to challenge over a wide canvas or sphere of operations, it is doubtful whether Maratha victory would have resulted in the rollback of British power from the subcontinent. The more probable outcome would have been the continuance of the Marathas as a viable independent power for some time. This would though admittedly have had its bearing on the political dynamics of the subcontinent.

He also overestimates the depth of British control over the subcontinent. On the face of it the British, subsequent to 1803, had no serious rival who could challenge them across the length and breadth of the subcontinent. He correctly says that the Sikh and Afghan challenges were local though he would have done well to dwell on the formidable nature of these seemingly localized challenges and the possibility of these challenges, especially the Sikh threat, developing into a wider challenge in the event of a Sikh victory. This is something Cooper neglects to probe.

He has also not examined the exact nature of the British hold over the supposedly loyal and diverse manpower they could command without brooking a challenge following their victory in 1803. The British hold over the native sepoys was a tenuous and conditional one. It was a conditional deference, especially in the Bengal and Madras armies, and said a lot of the fragile nature of the British power in the subcontinent. They were apparently unchallenged, yet they did not have the confidence to demand unconditional obedience from the basic source of their military power—the native sepoys. It said a lot about the nature of colonial hegemony, the shallowness of their dominance even while appearing as the unchallenged paramount masters of the subcontinent.⁴

4. See Sabyasachi Dasgupta, "In Defence of Honour and Justice: Sepoy Rebellions in the 19th Century", unpublished Ph. D. thesis, JNU, 2004.

One is probably being too harsh with Cooper as an investigation of the nature of the company's hold over its sepoys is outside the stated ambit of his study. He does come up with some refreshing arguments that challenge the established paradigms. Cooper's take on the reasons for the Maratha defeat is, for example, refreshing and represents a challenge to the established historiography on this matter. He takes to task Western analysts, both contemporary and later ones, who he says misread the reasons for the Maratha defeat.

He asserts that the Marathas in 1803 were superior in firepower and artillery and were not inferior in organizational and operational doctrine. He submits that if warfare indeed had its outcome decided by technological superiority then the Marathas should have won the war of 1803. Cooper argues that the Maratha guns in 1803 were far superior to the British guns and this gave them a definitive edge in artillery. He also lauds the Maratha infantry formations, which retained their ability to undertake complex manoeuvres despite the loss of their officer cadre and asserts that the Maratha infantry would have proved equal to the task if their officer corps had remained intact. Yet the Marathas lost. Why? He ascribes the Maratha defeat to the superior financial muscle, diplomacy and intelligence network of the English. This enabled them to buy out the predominantly European officer corps of the regular battalions of Daulat Rao Scindia, thereby paralysing these infantry units as far as offensive mobilization was concerned. The European officers who held strategic positions in the Maratha armies defected with vital information. This according to Cooper also played a large part in facilitating the English victory. He says that while the defection of these officers represented some kind of institutional weakness, it was also in keeping with South Asian military culture where it was considered perfectly natural for fighting men to defect if they had not been paid. All this, according to Cooper, was of course not comprehensible to European historians and sometimes to South Asian historians as well.⁵

5. See Cooper, *op. cit.* Also see, John Pemble, "Resources and Techniques in the Second Maratha War", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1976), pp. 375-404. Pemble argues that the Marathas lost essentially due to the loss of their warrior corps and political disunity. He too concedes that the Marathas in 1803 were a formidable political machine and the margin of defeat was very narrow. He differs from Cooper in the sense that he attributes the excellence of their war machine to their successful adoption of Western infantry and artillery tactics. He does not in the manner of Cooper argue for a long indigenous tradition in well disciplined infantry troops and effective artillery. Pemble implies that cavalry was the traditional strength of the Marathas but their best

Cooper's arguments as to the reasons for the Maratha defeat are analogous to those of Jos Gommans who analyses the reasons for the British eventually prevailing over each of their South Asian opponents. Gommans shows that the major South Asian powers had successfully closed the gap as far as English superiority in tactics, discipline and drill were concerned. South Asian armies also sought to raise disciplined bodies of infantry troops. He highlights innovations in tactics by Asian powers such as the Afghan tactic of continuous musket volley fire by mounted troops. Gommans also contests notions of Western technological superiority. He therefore attributes British success to their superior diplomacy and argues that Western diplomacy had definite aims and objectives and was invariably governed by national interests. In contrast, South Asian diplomacy was defined by the lack of definite aims and objectives. Consequently, they allowed the British to gain signal diplomatic and political advantages that tilted the balance in their favour.⁶

Cooper, while roughly arguing on the same lines, brings in added parameters in his endeavour to explain the British military success. He talks of the superior credit and financial network of the British and the decisive role played by it—something which Gommans neglects. His discussions on the role played by British diplomacy and intelligence and logistic networks, their dominance of military labour networks and the general domination of the South Asian military economy and the interdependence of all these factors is much more nuanced. Gommans' emphasis is mainly on the military aspect. Superior diplomacy as a possible reason for British military success is almost presented as an afterthought.

Cooper's disagreements with conventional historiography on Maratha warfare and the reasons ascribed by such histories for the Maratha decline are much more marked.

S.N. Sen, for example, attributes Maratha military success to their adoption of guerrilla (*bargi-giri*) tactics with Shivaji's army being the classic prototype of this model of warfare. Cooper ascribes the origin of

chance of defeating the British lay in the effective replication of Western methods of warfare. He thus differs from Cooper who assigns to the Marathas a long sophisticated military tradition which was more than a match for the English.

6. See Jos Gommans and Dirk H.A. Kolff, ed, *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia, 1000-1800* (Delhi, 2001).

such trends to the pressure of nationalist sentiments in the 1920s and 1930s, which attached an emotive value to the term guerrilla warfare. Hindu nationalists on their part, as Cooper implies, sought a continuity in the historic struggle against the Muslims by using the epithet guerrilla warfare. There was an ever-increasing deification of Shivaji negating any realistic appraisal of his military strategy and consequently of Maratha military culture. He asserts that historians like Sen on account of their lack of training in military historiography, continued to equate Maratha military culture with guerrilla warfare. They attributed later Maratha defeats to divergence from the classic guerrilla tactics employed by Shivaji.

The divergence or break in Maratha military culture was represented by the supposed adoption of Western infantry formations and tactics by the Maratha armies following the advent of the Europeans in India. Sen, unlike Cooper, discounts the Maratha tradition of artillery and posits Maratha attempts at building artillery as another instance of their attempts to imitate Western methods of warfare. Sen, in contrast to Cooper, held a low opinion of Maratha artillery and seemed to believe that the Marathas stood no chance against the English artillery which was far superior and was a decisive factor in English victories over its Indian rivals. Sen says that the new tactics were incompatible with the Maratha traditional way of warfare, which had brought to them such signal success in the past. Yet the Marathas clung to what he terms as a useless process of hybridization. He somewhat contradictorily again asserts that the Maratha *sirdars* continued to practise their old methods of warfare without any attempts at reform. Sen shows that the Marathas at the same time raised infantry battalions comprising foreign mercenaries commanded by foreign officers of diverse nationalities having extremely doubtful antecedents. The concomitant ill effects of this were mainly in the form of a culture of self aggrandizement these mercenary soldiers brought with them, much to the detriment of the Maratha army and to the exclusion of what Sen terms as the rejection of Shivaji's ideal of racial amity on a religious basis. Sen, in doing so, harks back to a supposedly golden past when Maratha armies were pure and fired by a national zeal. The moot point of course remains whether such notions of a golden past are rooted in reality.

Though Sen critiques the raising of infantry regiments and the culture surrounding them, he attempts to contextualize the raising of

such troops by arguing that the pan-Indian nature of Maratha power since the advent of Baji Rao-1 necessitated the raising of infantry battalions. Sen asserts that though the Maratha defeat at Panipat underscored the incompatibility of Western style tactics with their traditional ones, Maratha *sirdars* such as Scindia and to a lesser extent Raghunath Bhonsle-2 continued to raise infantry regiments as the reasons for doing so still existed. These armies characterized by what Sen describes as an inefficient command structure inevitably lost to the English at Assaye.

Sen puts down the inefficiency in command to the revival of feudalism after the death of Sambhaji. This led to disunity and discord and rendered them incapable of improving their military institutions. He argues that such feudal leaders failed to keep pace with the scientific progress in other parts of the world and tellingly comments that while Europe witnessed a steady march from feudalism to democracy, the process was reversed in Maharashtra with fatal consequences for Maratha military power.⁷

Sen's work, first published in 1928, basically drew on some persistent myths regarding the so-called golden age of Maratha warfare when their mobile predatory form of warfare had carried most before them. These myths ascribe subsequent decline of the Marathas to the adoption of alien tactics. A communication from the British resident at Poona to his counterpart at the court of Raghunath Bhonsle in the immediate aftermath of the battle at Assaye tellingly underscores this point. The communication observed that Scindia probably never meant to pursue a predatory mode of warfare as the greater part of his cavalry was not suited for this kind of warfare. The majority of his troops had adopted the European mode of warfare. It therefore made his army what he terms more tangible and liable to defeat by the British troops than if it were composed principally of the thrifty hardy cavalry which originally raised the Marathas into a commanding nation.⁸

7. See S.N. Sen, *The Military System of The Marathas* (Calcutta, 1958; first published 1928).

8. See Jadunath Sarkar and G.S. Sardesai, ed, *English Records of Maratha History, Poona Residency Correspondence*, Volume 10 (EDS), R. Sinh, *Treaty of Bassein and War in the Deccan* (Bombay, 1951, Part 2, Section 5, p. 153): Letter from B. Close, Resident at Poona, to J. Webbe, The Resident with Bhonsla.

Contemporary authors such as Dirom and Grant Duff mirrored such Eurocentric stereotypes which accorded a low status to Maratha infantry and cavalry though British soldiers such as the future Duke of Wellington drastically revised their views following their exposure to the deadly Maratha fire and impressive discipline in adverse circumstances by the Maratha infantry at Assaye. Nevertheless, such exceptions apart, Eurocentric stereotyping continued with even South Asian historians such as Sen, who fell a victim to it though the motivating factors might have been different.

Writing in the 1820s, Grant Duff was a perfect prototype of this European bias. He argues that the Marathas achieved imperfect Westernization on account of their culture being unsuitable for the receipt of such tactical innovations. The result was that the Maratha armies were decidedly inferior to the company armies in terms of organization, tactics, firepower, etc. Duff therefore portrays Maratha defeat as inevitable. He epitomizes Western commentators of Anglo-Maratha warfare who seriously misread the reasons for the British victory in 1803.⁹

The amazing persistence of such trends in the historiography of Maratha warfare is reflected in Stewart Gordon's influential work on the Marathas. His arguments, for example, bear in parts an uncanny resemblance to Sen's views on the reasons for the decline of the Maratha military power. Gordon, for example, asserts that Panipat revealed the inherent difficulties in reconciling the various modes of warfare such as mobile cavalry, trained infantry or artillery to a huge Mughal-style army. He describes Maratha artillery as ineffectual and posits English superiority in artillery as one of the marked contributory reasons for their victory. Gordon in a manner akin to Sen sees the appearance of uniformed artillery and infantry regiments in the Maratha armies as a break. He contrasts these armies with Shivaji's cavalry and lightly armed infantry. Battle tactics supposedly consisted of cavalry raids into the enemy territory with the intent of cutting off supplies and making deep incursions so as to draw the enemy off. The infantry played a role in fighting in mountain terrain or other difficult terrains. Gordon argues that the fort played a major role in Shivaji's scheme of things and served as cantonment to garrison troops. He discounts the existence of artillery in Shivaji's time.

9. See James Cunningham Grant, *A History of The Mahrattas*, 3 vols (London, 1826).

Gordon again mirrors Sen by arguing that it was Baji Rao's ambitious plan of conquest that generated the demand for large armies comprising Western style infantry battalions. He, however, partly differs from Sen on the probable reasons of the Maratha defeat. Gordon gives four main reasons for the Maratha defeat:

- (i) the momentum of British victory in the Napoleonic wars;
- (ii) superior British training, discipline and drill;
- (iii) superior credit; and
- (iv) better Artillery.¹⁰

He thus breaks new ground in advocating superior credit of the British as one of the reasons for their ultimate victory and sort of anticipates Cooper's argument, though the superior credit of the British features more centrally in Cooper's hypothesis with regard to the reasons for the English success in 1803. Gordon's other postulates regarding the reasons for the decline of the British break no new ground. These are merely old wine in a new bottle.

Cooper, on the contrary, represents a paradigm shift in the historiography of Maratha warfare. He contests stereotypes about Maratha military culture being synonymous with guerrilla warfare and argues for the presence of a much more nuanced and sophisticated tradition, which displayed certain long-term patterns. He fundamentally links Maratha military culture with the South Asian military economy and to a lesser extent the physical and cultural environment of 'Maharashtra'. Cooper argues that physical and cultural environment ensured the formation of a small band of clan based mercenary warrior bands under leaders who offered their services to the best bidder. Some of these clan leaders also built their fortified strongholds as a base for territorial expansion, thereby becoming players in the South Asian economy. However, as Cooper shows, the Marathas had to await the advent of Shivaji to become a major player in the South Asian military economy. Prior to that, they were reputed as a formidable mercenary infantry garrison troops. Their

10. See Stewart Gordon, *Marathas, Marauders and State Formation in Eighteenth Century India* (New Delhi, 1994). Also see, Stewart Gordon, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Marathas, 1600-1818* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

skills and reputation as mercenary troops, as Cooper asserts, were also enhanced by their constant exposure to varied military traditions in the Deccan. A long coastline and service to regional powerbrokers like Ahmad Nizam Shah, whose court was home to the representatives and officers of several major South Asian and European powers, ensured a constant interaction with diverse military traditions.

Cooper seeks to demonstrate that the Marathas had a longstanding military tradition of using in concert, well-disciplined infantry and cavalry troops, which predated the European presence in South Asia. The Marathas also picked up formidable skills in handling artillery. He opines that Maratha armies by the time of Shivaji projected organizational models resembling a triad consisting of infantry, artillery and cavalry. Their operational doctrine involved the coordinated use of this triad to achieve maximum devastation. Hit and run (*bargi-giri*) tactic was only used in certain specific situations as part of the overall war strategy. Cooper says that the much maligned Pindaries were actually lightly clad horsemen meant to operate under this operational doctrine.

Maratha armies developed a further cutting edge under dynamic leaders such as Baji Rao-I under whom the Marathas projected power on a pan-Indian scale. He argues that Maratha armies under him adopted what he terms as proto modern warfare and that they showed impressive techniques of utilizing firepower. Baji Rao's troops employed a combination of small arm and heavy artillery which was designed to smother his opponent. While the aim of European artillery was to create holes in the enemy infantry through which their own infantry would advance, the Marathas advocated a more holistic approach. The Maratha philosophy of the use of artillery concentrated on identifying and eliminating the opponents as targets to be eliminated. The Maratha use of artillery thus went further than the mere creation of space for the artillery to advance.

Cooper thus argues for the existence of a strong and sophisticated tradition that envisaged the pursuit of a coordinated and all encompassing form of warfare. He, in contrast to other historians of Maratha warfare, advocates a continuity thesis as far as the evolution of Maratha war tactics goes. He challenges established paradigms by arguing that the Marathas possessed an infantry tradition stretching back to antiquity. He contradicts conventional wisdom that states that the appearance of

European armies led the Marathas to imitate their tactics and formations, which led to the creation of Western style infantry formations and the employment of artillery.

Cooper implies that Panipat was in some senses a break as the loss of several *sirdars* in that battle forced the Marathas to extensively recruit European mercenary officers who commanded units made up of diverse ethnic communities of the subcontinent. It was however not a break in terms of battle tactics. He also argues that the Marathas had long employed and in their turn served as mercenary troops. What was probably new was the fact that the wholesale Maratha losses was forcing the Marathas to employ mercenaries on an unprecedented scale. They also occupied positions of centrality in the Maratha armies which no mercenaries had held before. Cooper says that while Shivaji's army employed mercenaries, the core of his army was Maratha in composition.¹¹ His contention that the diverse ethnicity of the Maratha army gave it a pan-Indian outlook is difficult to accept. These ethnic communities had no commitment to the Maratha cause and were ready to go over to the enemy when offered better terms. They remained mercenary soldiers with no identification with the Maratha cause. This was by no means a pan-Indian coalition of communities united in intent and ideology offering a formidable challenge to the British. The pan-Indian nature of the Maratha challenge was reflected only in the geographical depth of the challenge. It was the last conflict where the British would have to fight over a wide span of the subcontinent. The mutiny, for instance, despite the romance and myth associated with it, was fought out mainly in the Ganga Jamuna Doab.

Cooper's contention that the defection of these communities was representative of South Asian culture where traditionally fighting units offered themselves to the highest bidder, sounds hollow. Firstly, there were considerable instances where mercenary communities refused to defect despite temptations. Ibrahim Gardi's units, for example, fought magnificently in Panipat despite the antagonist being of the same religion as they. There were instances where sepoy regiments of the company refused to defect to the enemy despite their pay being in arrears for months.¹² He seems to preclude the possibility of South Asian

11. See Randolph Cooper, *op. cit.*

12. See Sabyasachi Dasgupta, *op. cit.*

communities possessing notions of oneness based on ethnicity, religion or geographical contiguity. While he professes to accord the South Asian military experience an independent history, he exhibits a peculiar Eurocentricism which arrogated to European civilization the monopoly of nationalistic sentiments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such prejudices emanating from somebody who professes to write history by way of challenging Eurocentric notions of military history is unexpected.

Cooper's prejudices probably led him to ignore the fact that the breakup of centralized Maratha polity into five competing centers of authority with the Peshwa increasingly being the nominal head played a huge role in the Maratha eclipse. While Cooper does mention that the rise of Baji Rao had impacted upon the Maratha central power in the long run, he fails to really develop the argument. Though he does mention that the immense capabilities of Baji Rao-I had effectively bridged the gap between civil and military power in the Maratha polity to their temporary advantage, he could have dwelt at more length on the problems which crept in when less dynamic successors could not effectively unify the military and political functions of the Peshwa. It is precisely for this reason one feels that a more detailed examination of the factors that led to the conflict would have been welcome. Cooper cursorily analyses the reasons behind the conflict. The reader is informed that the ostensible reason for the British declaring war on the Marathas, or more specifically the Scindias and the Bhonsles, was their violation of the treaty of Bassein—a subsidiary treaty signed between the Peshwa and the British. The real reason implied is of course the hegemonic desire of the British.

What a more detailed analysis would have revealed is that the decline of the Marathas as a people or as united power which Shivaji had moulded them into and which constituted an important break in the history of the Marathas, afforded to the British an opportunity to meddle into and divide the Marathas. It was not a unified Maratha power which they were taking on. Nationality was therefore a question. After all, it was not the mercenary tradition of going over to the highest bidder which made the European mercenaries defect to the English; it was in the case of the English a feeling of nationality whereas to the French it was broader European sentiments against the Asiatic.

Cooper, in his enthusiasm to argue his continuity thesis, fails to note these important breaks in Maratha history, which would have had an important bearing on their capacity to project power. Firstly, the advent of Shivaji constituted, as mentioned above, an important break. The Marathas were now a contender for power in the shape of a unified centralized polity. Baji Rao-I took the process further and made the Marathas for all practical purposes the predominant power in India. However, the seeds of fragmentation were being sown, the negative impact of which became glaringly evident under the less capable Peshwas. The subsequent fragmentation of the Marathas into five competing centers of power, one may argue, retarded their capacity to contend for the domination of the Indian subcontinent. It was an important break, which Cooper ignores.

Cooper also overlooks explaining the fact that not a single ethnic Maratha soldier or officer defected from Scindia's or Bhonsle's army. Those who had defected were European officers and other South Asian communities. While the Marathas in 1803 were a fragmented polity, the respective units still commanded loyalty and appeal to emotional bonds. Nationality in the Western sense might not have been a reality in the early years of the nineteenth century, yet there were ties and bonds that made people perceive themselves as one or part of the same community. Therefore, nationalism, or proto nationalism if you wish to call it, could not be wished away when it came to South Asian communities.

Cooper's work is nevertheless important as he seeks to challenge the deeply entrenched stereotypes. His work effects a historiographical breakthrough as it challenges notions of the inherent backwardness of South Asian military culture in opposition to the West. Jos Gommans does attempt something of the same nature while reviewing Afghan military innovations in the eighteenth century. He also questions notions of the superiority of Western arms over the Orient following the eighteenth and more so in the nineteenth century. Gommans though does not deal with South Asia proper and Cooper in this sense emerges as a pioneer.¹³ Both Cooper and Gommans are fundamentally critiquing the military revolution thesis of Michael Roberts and Geoffery Parker. This very influential school of thought argues that there was a military revolution in the West between the 1550s and 1800 involving innovations

13. See Jos Gommans and Dirk H.A. Kolff, *op. cit.*

in technology, tactics, organizations, etc. The innovations were in the nature of greater use of disciplined infantry men, the enhanced use of firepower, the rapid increase of armies with the corresponding changes in the form of government. These were coupled with important innovations in naval warfare which gave the Western navies a clear advantage over their Eastern rivals. This gave the West a distinct military advantage over the East and enabled them to build big global empires. Parker says that major Indian powers, such as the Marathas, adopted Western military techniques at the eleventh hour with considerable skill. Yet it was not sufficient to arrest the pace of European expansion. He argues that the Indian powers probably did not have the time to master completely European warfare techniques. He points out that even though the Marathas employed European gunners and aped European gun making techniques, they had not fully mastered the art of handling artillery. Consequently, many field guns used to be lost in battle.¹⁴

Several scholars such as Jeremy Black have challenged the military revolution thesis in the West. They would rather accord the term evolution rather than revolution to the changes in the Western military organization between the mid fifteenth and mid sixteenth centuries. Black also questions notions of European superiority of arms. He argues that non-European modes in the eighteenth century often showed extreme sophistication and were relevant to the environment in which they occurred. He points out that despite the often impressive success of Western arms, Western success against non-European modes of warfare was not guaranteed. Black shows that Indian powers such as Mysore and the Marathas often defeated the English using mobile cavalry tactics.

Black's arguments are limited in the scope of their challenge to a Eurocentric rendering of military history. While he contests the notion of a Western inevitability of victory when pitted against Asiatic arms, he seems to accept that the use of disciplined infantry formations and artillery in India was an innovation introduced by the Western powers. He does not account for the existence of an indigenous tradition of using disciplined infantry troops or the effective use of artillery. It is here that Cooper scores over him. Cooper's critique of Eurocentricism is at a

14. See Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

fundamental level and is wider than that of Black in breadth and vision. It is in effect a paradigm shift.¹⁵

While Cooper rightly and crucially condemns European ethnocentric renderings of South Asian military history, one would be more comfortable if he had posited Eurocentricism as a general philosophy of history rather than necessarily equate it with the ethnicity of the historian though one is not asking to discount the role of ethnicity in the ideological makeup of the historian. One could point to South Asian historians whose writings exemplify Eurocentricism; on the other hand, Western historians such as Cooper, Jos Gommans and Dirk Kloff strive to consciously combat and transcend ethnic biases.

However, despite its shortcomings, Cooper's work is impressive in its range and intent. He very importantly strives to impart a history and validity to South Asian military culture, its values and ethics, something which South Asian historians have often been loath to attempt. Its ambit and significance lie beyond the confines of military history. His arguments have important ramifications for students of South Asian polities of the eighteenth and the first part of the nineteenth century. Notions of backwardness and the tendency to attribute the so-called progressive features in colonial India to the results of Western influence need to be re-examined. It is hoped that Cooper's work would inspire other revisionist works on South Asia in general. His book, to put it in a nutshell, is an important path-breaking study despite his considerable reliance on translated sources, and deserves to be read by all serious students of South Asian history.

15. See Jeremy Black, *A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society: 1500-1800* (London, 1991). Also see idem, *Warfare in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1999).